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Betwixt The Many Internments: Her Naked Skin in Reflections

Abstract: Her Naked Skin by Rebecca Lenkiewicz enshrines a playwright's remarkable ambition finding skin in the panorama of thespian architectonics. Being first performed on 24th July 2008, it demonstrates a determination in its mettlesome acclaim towards rightful suffrage as a political struggle and an individuals' strive against repression. It imprints an apotheosis of untrammelled courage resisting the difficult and onerous confines of incarcerated bodies which were found between the many internments of mortifying afflictions. For it conceives an autonomy inaugurated in the espousal of a new faith hoisted by the many upholders drawn in the communion of resistance and realizations.

This paper proposes to articulate the evocative reflections of history lensed in the clarion of the suffrage movement as defying bastions of coercion and physical duress bestirred in its blazing towards a decisive battlecry. It also frames the advent of a performance narrative turning to history and lettered in the stories of unshackled claims aimed towards finding eloquence of the body. Embodying an account engirdled in the trappings of constraint and silence, the paper shall mount a literary unfolding realized in the courage of liberation and fostered in the movement and beyond.

Keywords: Historicity, Internments, Sexuality, Suffrage

Her Naked Skin adduces a conviction kindled in the bronzed imprints of time travel and also portrays the historicity of the suffrage movement which is found reminisced in the occupancy of memories and affluence of stagecraft. The play's profundity is furthered as an imperishable avowal for equality and gender justice and fosters an awakened dialogue sentient in the bloom of unimpeded hope. As a play it portrays a resistance be spoken in the new affirmations of undiminished acclaims of women lionized in the eloquent quests for freedom.

The opening scene in its arrival paints a distant sepia past coloured in the tragic circumstance of Emily Wilding Davinson's solus daring framed in the inaugural snapshots of an eruption from "the Derby of 1913" (Lenkiewicz 3) and consequently her falling into the frigid hands of silent closure with hope diminishing and herself bruised and helpless indicating an espousal towards an impassioned belief for an attainment of voice bestirred in the theatre of resistance. As the play mentions tellingly, "The horse's race around Tattenham Corner and a small grainy figure comes onto the track and is trampled underfoot" (Lenkiewicz 3). Emily Wilding Davinson's radical calling towards the suffrage movement proclaims the affirmative desire of the movement where the play is contextualized and is further affirmed by the book *Literature of The Women's Suffrage Campaign in England* which mentions that she discontinued her teaching profession and aligned with the W.S.P.U. (Women's Social and Political Union) in 1906, a union which was established by Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughter Christabel in 1903 and which was guided by the motto "Deeds, Not Words" (Nelson XL).

The theatre of resistance is played out in the conspicuous whirl of the suffrage movement and its toil relocates the terrors of an uprising brought alive in the tribulations of a toilsome fight for representation in the play. From the consequent demonstrations of history to an artistic demonstration of the quest for suffrage movement in its fortuity of daring, the

play has Celia and Eve, who too make a dare to break free and to resist patriarchal conventions. For Celia and Eve as the protagonists who in their fledgling valour are portrayed as custodians of a new political credence. They emerge as the new protagonists birthing in their testimonies of protest and who are seen resisting confinements of patriarchy and marking their presence as legions of change in roles upended and refit for the new feminal. Their arrival in the play as compatriots in a new concord seeking claims is quite marked. Celia and Eve rise in their dauntless crusade as one of the many actors of change, is reminiscent of Emily Wilding Davison's daring. They come together like many women portrayed in the play as inspired by an awakened testament roused in concert. For the suffrage movement panegyricized a resolute clarion invading the sleepy hollows of neglect and derision, now challenged in the fury of agitated echoes bellowing "Windows are being smashed simultaneously throughout the West End." (Lenkiewicz 9)

Smashing Windows in the wake of a tumultuous resistance and fight for justice is mocked at and ridiculed which the play evidences. However women fighting a political order immune to change and indifferent to the woes of many who stood for equality and dignity became an inevitable force in the etchings of history. The play in its portrayal of historical past creates a semblance of truth in the diaphanous borders of time travel embedding its vitality in the call for change. A change imperiled in the torturous shackles of imprisonment which scarred individual lives in their exertion for liberty and selfhood. For it represents bodies trapped in tenebrous spaces falling silent and unheeded in the insufficiency of identity space with women's portrayal as "hidden, gagged or muzzled" (Lenkiewicz 27). The play inverts the category of fiction as women's movement aimed to dispel the idea of women as fictionalised beings whereas the play's verity in its interplay of fiction establishes the truth of equality and dignity.

Gerda Lerner in her academic assertion of tracing the formation of patriarchy and women's oppression in her book *The Creation of Patriarchy* and also a chapter named likewise quite accurately triggers an awakened debate showcasing women's oppression through time what she calls it as "commodification of female sexuality" (Lerner 216) at the hands of men. She recapitulates the ordeal through history where women's roles were negated and had to undergo exclusion. She mentions:

Women have for millennia participated in the process of their own subordination because they have been psychologically shaped so as to internalize the idea of their own inferiority. The unawareness of their own history of struggle and achievement has been one of the major means of keeping women subordinate" (218). [To which she further adds, her views pointing towards a more assertive clarion.] TO STEP OUTSIDE OF PATRIARCHAL THOUGHT MEANS: Being sceptical toward every known system of thought; being critical of all assumptions, ordering values and definitions (Lerner 228).

Lerner's ideas promulgate and affirms a conviction embedded in the play which focuses on suffragism as a movement that posits an unorthodox surge which rattled institutionalized conventions antiquated in their bleary pride and were seen firmly ensconced in a parochial lost world of patriarchy often be fooled in taking up arms against a resilient force of women who believed in themselves to be possessors of a new expression of equality, unmistakably echoing this affirmation through the characters of the play. As the epithet vocalized 'The New Woman', it empowered a coinage seemingly unhindered in the utterance of a new lexicon written and entrenched in the ambitious daring of a clarion seeking kindred harmony in the stories of change and gripping imagination. To use the expression 'writings on the wall' in more ways than one, the play exhibits a bold rewording

in the face of a revolution quite literally on the walls of the prison, the city streets and even in the quest of a calling visible and aflamed in the flush of a new quiver which the movement advanced. It set itself in an unimpeded lettering unabashed in the glowing metaphor of newer claims and legitimate life scripts borne out of the turmoils and tangles of time. The play prods an acclamation to cast off the infirmities of yonder years where suffragism baptized a valorous consciousness played out in a generation's quest for equality, forming an overarching narrative. What becomes evident in the action of the play, suffragism transformed into a new faith in its towering resilience towards oppression and stunted fear in the demonstrations of rebellious mutiny, for the quest of equality attained its distinction as a new cult rendering exploits of courage.

In the play the significance of the prison/imprisonment alludes to a ubiquitous allegory challenging testaments of courage with brutal visions of afflictions soused in the unquiet trauma often becoming hostile to the fragile frames of those interned. It is only in their unyielding effrontery of the interned which is sapped by the perfidious assertions of power in evoked images of crushing chastisement which is often bescreened in an overwhelming display of screams and silence of the many imprisoned.

HARDIE. Might I remind of the Honourable Gentleman of the House that the last death connected to a hunger strike was in 1870. And the prisoner in question died not from the fasting but as a result of the forcible feeding. These women are political prisoners. What they are being subjected to is an illegal process. They are worn and weak with hunger. In this condition they are seized upon and held down by anything up to ten persons. Are you aware, sir, that a steel gag is often enforced? It is lodged between their teeth to keep their mouth open? (1.20).

Confinement as a trope accented a silent narrative of control betoken in the draconian proficiency of penal institutions and rendered aloud in the confines of its relentless tiresome shackles. The penitentiary in its symbolic portrayal renders a curtain restraint of physical and psychological order. It extends as deprivation built in the untender constructions of patriarchal trappings coercive in its many evidences of unfeeling stratagems. The prison in its nature of confinement takes into its custody a scrupulous design dispensed in the arduous limitations acted out as an inimical symbolic apparatus of power.

The chapter “The Performance of Punishment” by Caoimhe Mc Avinchey in the book *Theatre and Prison* dwells upon the idea of the prison and its emergence as a site of “crime control”, “containment” and “correction.” Travelling through time, the account renders a chronological progression where prisons from being a site of “containment” became a site of reform. The prison still alluded to as a metaphor of silent control where the convict now under observation had to be “penitent” and the idea of prison/imprisonment distended as a category where the control manifested not only in its physical abhorrent nature but also acted in a subtle concealment of powerplay. The chapter mentions, “The retributive hand of the state and the offending body that it had once marked, ripped and destroyed were both withdrawn from public view. The prison walls now not only kept convicts in, but kept the public out. While the interior space performed upon the deviant subjects, the exterior architecture also played a role in shaping public perception of the idea of prison.” (McAvinchey 30)

For Celia and Eve along with the imprisoned suffragettes, the great escape could only be made by letting go off the reins of a stern patriarchal bind whether made of mortar and brick as in a prison or codified in the control of social, political and psychological order. Barred and clamped in the silence of seclusion, the prison ordained a rigorous clampdown on the voices of dissent. Its many allegorical manifestations overflowing as a stretched political

imagination of the other half, a political reality oblivious of the new world order of the suffrage movement quite eager in their daring,

FLORENCE. Why don't you get yourself a proper job? Instead of collecting birds and putting them in cages. It's more the act of deranged child than an evolved man, I must warn you. But still I wish you luck.

(1.11)

The play reminds us that women immured in the antiquated silence of history battled imprisonment, for their claims became forbidden and restive to the tyranny of dusty truisms unhallowed in the ineffectual numbness. For once again the prison emerges in the realm of a physical and psychological space and for the many withheld in its cold fright and lulled silence, it never betrayed its stygian swallow, death like in its living presence. Its looming towers and turrets casting frightful shadows on a darkened universe illumined in a liminal glow, playing hide and seek with those interned.

Echoing memories in the advent of patriarchal censure, the many accounts of women unfolded tales of horror and humiliation wielded in the rigid seclusions of the prison. Constance Lytton in *FROM PRISONS AND PRISONERS: STIRRING TESTIMONY OF A SUFFRAGETTE* in Chapter XIII "WALTON GAOL, LIVERPOOL: MY THIRD IMPRISONMENT" recounts an experience lodged in the unsavoury accounts of internment and subjugation. Living the horrors of prison as 'Jane Warton' by concealing her privileged identity, Lytton in her memoir talks about an unyielding suppress which manifested in its physical and psychological hold over women. The trauma of protestors who many like her believed in "no surrender" which meant undergoing the ordeal of forcible feeding through a long rubber tube which made its way through the mouth of the prisoner opened by the sheer force of a wooden or steel gag. The prisoner often lay pinioned under the dominance of

persecution silent and worn out in the aftermath of an invasion repeated in its performance on the body yet again forcing a crippling submission.

Shiela Rowbotham in her book *Hidden from History: 300 years of Women's Oppression and the Fight Against It* in the chapter "The Vote" mentions, "In a more general sense the women were forced in conflict with the state to see through the myth of the impartiality of the law. They were tried and judged by men. They had no part in making the laws. They were protected only by the bounds of masculine authority, appendages of father or husband. Once beyond the pale they were without any rights at all." (Rowbotham 84-85)

However the movement in its resilience and gravity embosomed an inspired courage of an empowered sentiment forsaking the terrors of imprisonment and being nurtured in the espousal of an arresting desire to look out of the prohibitive walls of imprisonment. To have their rights claimed one also ardently brings into reflection the life and memories of Emmeline Pankhurst and the establishment of the W.S.P.U. (Women's Social and Political Union). Emmeline Pankhurst portrays in "From My Own Story" her memories in the lived annotations of childhood experience; the canvas of her upbringing replete with tales and stories of consequence leaving their traces on her impressionable mind. The words "slavery" and "emancipation" holding out a deeper meaning and interrogation towards a world order. She mentions that how the male child was privileged over his sister and goes even further, that once her father in his usual nighttime leave-taking said "What a pity she wasn't born a lad" (Pankhurst 95) while she "chose to feign slumber" (Pankhurst 95) though she mentions, "I found this view of things difficult to reconcile with the fact that both my father and mother were advocates of equal suffrage." (Pankhurst 95) The W.S.P.U. was established in the year of October 1903 and her daughters Sylvia and Christabel worked towards the suffrage cause, Emmeline Pankhurst mentions,

We called upon it to demand of the Government to yield to public opinion and give women votes. And we declared that we would wage war, not only on all anti-suffrage forces, but on all neutral and non-active forces. Every man with a vote was considered a foe to woman suffrage unless he was prepared to be actively a friend. (Pankhurst 101)

Her Naked Skin as a play foregrounds provocations of identity encountered on the streets, outside political establishments and in the prison mounting resistance as a call to challenge patriarchal praxis, the play plays the orthodox variance of sexuality pitted against the bleak images of the prison. Unimpaired in the inflamed terrors of confinement Celia and Eve seek a new advent in a camaraderie finding strength in the untenanted extent of human emotions. Their friendship stirs a proclaimed elocution voiced in the clarion of the movement. Lenkiewicz portrays their love for each other in the passionate proximity startled in the throbbing of a roused admiration and played out in the willful glance of a renewed emotional lilt. Love as an untried sanction makes a conscious trespassing in its emotional arrival and surrender for the both of them daring an aspiration as individuals who find their lives scripted in the contours of experiential twilight. The play in its suggestive artistic display advances the idea of confinement and shackled narratives of control posing a challenge to the rearing encounters of Celia and Eve's intimacy and thereby calling into question the tropes of proscriptive internment played out in opposition to sexual variance. But the play also distends the margins of a familiar sexual desire cast in the embedded criterion of sanctions moulded and framed in the changelessness of lapidary social constructions. Unbarred in the fortitude of endurance braving afflictions of ignominy and wounding, their tribulations are assuaged by their desires' tender profess in the hope of gathering little gold dust as comrades and as fellow travellers admiring a distant chimera. The camaraderie of Celia and Eve is found in a wakened flourish of love and

acknowledgement and is nevertheless superintended by the watchful restraint of an implacable patriarchal suppress, disdainful of their accounts and remorseless in its punitive assail.

Fostering a critical enquiry into a non-conformist social space John Brannigan in the Chapter “New Historicism and Cultural Materialism Today” cites the work of Jonathan Dollimore’s *Sexual Dissidence* and positions his argument in the wake of a challenge brought before the “dominant culture”. He uses Dollimore’s reflections, “how the normative construction of sexuality polices differences in sexual taste and assigns negative connotations to ‘deviations’ from sexual norms. He pursues this further and examines how ‘deviant’ sexual identities can become sites of resistance to the ‘language, ideologies, and cultures of domination’.” (Brannigan 125)

Perhaps a dissident sexual space which gains visibility from the dimness of invisibility and the regular bind of normativity is idealized in the historical coherence of the suffrage struggle. It is noteworthy that Pramod K Nayar in his book *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory* under the chapter, “Queer Theory” talks about Adrienne Rich’s essay, which states, “that ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ ensured a woman’s continued subordination by continually privileging a man’s needs” (Nayar 194). In his assertion he also mentions the argument of the Radicalesbians accentuating a feminist position, “even mainstream feminist thought and activism, seeking freedom from patriarchy and the bind of gender, is built on an ideology of ‘Sameness’” (Nayar 195).

Apparently the play advances this binary; the idea of the body interned in the archival quiver of history and also in the comprehension of dissident sexuality and its realization of being different. But it is the body which in its primacy is the central argument in the play both undergoing physical torture in the suffrage struggle and hoping to acquire dignity in their right for citizenship and again a reification of it as a sexual confrontation between Celia

and Eve, by bringing body in the broader discourse by negating the idea of ‘sanctioned notions of sexuality’.

It is the body in question that is subject to terror and conflict. It’s subjugation as a narrative of control demands a forsaking of its conventional bind. Celia mentions later:

CELIA. ... Love is just fear, I suppose. Masquerading as a fever. Then you explore each other and suddenly you have licence to become totally pedestrian. And ultimately abusive. (2. 69)

The ‘Sameness’ of love in the relationship exists as an advent of experience and acknowledgement but the experience leads to another threshold and beyond. Celia contradicts Eve’s assertion of love by saying.

CELIA. No. The reverence has gone. It’s not something to mourn. It’s rather liberating not to be worried about every pose you strike and every expression you make.

EVE. It would be different if we were allowed to be together.

CELIA. Men and women are allowed to be together. And they’re the worst of the lot. (2. 69-70)

What becomes evident is that their love’s tender bind loses its hold and the bind of the body is attenuated further. A shackle broken, and an internment forsaken, a pain lived and a memory etched in the forever experience of the many internments. The body in the play has revolted, it contradicts, it unbinds, loves, is consumed but also unhands. It unhands and throws the protagonists into an anonymous silence of incoherent unknowable circumstance, their experience altered by an awareness of the suffrage cause and more importantly a certain transcendence of the internment they had.

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